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New York Was Site of Secret CIA-Army Biological War Tests

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Part I

by Vaughn Young & Andy Lenarcic

The Central Intelligence Agency conducted five consecutive days of covert biological warfare experiments in the New York City area in 1956 with the cooperation of U.S. Army personnel.

This and other previously unknown biological tests were discovered during a four month investigation of CIA documents previously released under the Freedom of Information Act. The following is the first part of what researchers for American Citizens for Honesty in Government, an arm of the Church of Scientology, discovered. —Editor.

For six consecutive days in 1950, a U.S. Navy ship cruised off the coast of San Francisco, exposing over 800,000 people in the Bay Area to a daily cloud of bacteria.

Shortly after the tests, doctors south of San Francisco noted an unusual incidence of pneumonia among some of their Palo Alto patients, one of whom subsequently died.

When the first story about the San Francisco test was exposed, a grandson of the Palo Alto fatality recalled an article about the unusual pneumonia outbreak. Linking the medical findings with what was known about the test, Edward Nevin brought suit against the Army for the death of his grandfather. The matter is currently before the courts.

Other instances of open-air tests on American cities have been cited but little is known. According to a list provided a Senate subcommittee in 1977, over a dozen U.S. cities were the targets of "harmless" biological agents.

One of the more bizarre occurred in 1966, when germ-laden light bulbs were dropped in a New York City subway to test the effects of a covert bacteriological attack. It is not known what health hazards ensued. No reports of the test were ever released.

According to a Senate report, the Army's Special Operations Division (SOD) conducted the vulnerability tests against selected sites. However, the report notes, similar "CIA projects were distinct [from the Army's] because they involved the mating of delivery systems to lethal or incapacitating biological agents."

MKNAOMI

In 1952, a secret agreement was reached between the CIA and the SOD at Fort Detrick, Maryland. The SOD was to assist the CIA in secretly developing, testing, and maintaining biological agents and delivery systems. The CIA code named the cooperative effort "MKNAOMI."

According to a 1975 report of the Senate Intelligence Committee, it is "fair to conclude from the types of weapons developed for the CIA, and from the extreme security associated with MKNAOMI, that the possibility of first use of biological weapons by the CIA was contemplated."

The SOD also researched "the possibilities of large-scale covert use of biological weapons." But, "so far as the Committee was able to determine," the capability was "never tapped by Army or CIA."

However, CIA documents unraveled by American Citizens for Honesty in Government (ACHG) now point to a five-day covert experiment against the New York City area in 1956, using a yet-unidentified biological agent.

The material was found in a previously released CIA file. Among the most heavily censored of any released by the Agency under the Freedom of Information Act, the material consists almost entirely of receipts of activities and purchases made with CIA funds. According to a May 12, 1955 memo found in the file, the money was being spent to support CIA activities being carried out with a unit at Fort Detrick, Maryland.

The receipts stem from a petty cash fund used by the CIA-Army team. Some receipts are marked "emergency" to indicate that such goods could not be procured quickly enough with the regular fund, and the petty cash float, which averaged only a few hundred dollars, had to be relied upon.

Thus, in addition to severe censorship of the receipts, ACHG was also faced with the prospect that the file was only a partial reflection of the cash transactions and provided an incomplete picture of the CIA-Army experiments.

CIA censors had sought to delete every reference that could identify the location of the test team. In some cases, the names of firms that had printed the actual receipt form had been struck out by overzealous censors.

However, New York City was identified as the hub of the 1956 test through a \$1.50 receipt for an "Observatory fee, empire state" (sic) for "weather data" during the five day test.

CONTINUED

THE 1953 MERCURY

Approved For

A number of receipts carry the marks "BC" or "BC test" or "OP BC." However, one receipt clearly identifies the code name of the test: Op[eration] Big City.

Operation Big City centers on the travels of a 1953 Mercury with a highly unusual exhaust system that was different even to a casual observer—the tailpipes of the car extended a full foot and a half beyond their normal length.

Work on the exhaust system's function apparently took three months to complete with different components being purchased weeks apart. It must be assumed that each part was being tested and possibly modified before the next was purchased.

An October 28, 1955 receipt notes that an "exhaust pipe for car; (sic) dissemination study" was purchased for \$3.57. The receipt also notes there was a "security reason for [the] purchase" and "also urgency of experimental trial." (sic)

Two weeks later, gasoline was purchased for "5 road tests, dissemination." It is not shown in the receipts if a six volt motor purchased for \$42.00 and platinum tubing for a "gadget" were used. Both were bought earlier.

After another month and a half, a dual exhaust was bought for a "dissemination study." On the same day, January 20, 1956, a subscription was taken out to the *New York Times* to "gather weather data, etc."

Four days later, a dual pipe kit was installed on the 1953 Mercury for \$47.17. It is not shown if any of the parts purchased earlier were installed then or earlier.

Only one final alteration was made. The tail-pipes were extended another foot and a half.

OPERATION BIG CITY

According to the receipts, the Mercury was driven on turnpikes and through tunnels from February 11-15, 1956. The driver parked in established lots four times at an expense of \$13.25 and spent \$6.40 in tolls. Each turnpike and tunnel was traveled twice.

The day after the Mercury left, a hotel room was taken out at an unidentified location for the duration of the test.

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test, data, weather reports." The forecast was rain.

On February 14, 1956, someone went to the observatory of the Empire State Building for "weather data." Meanwhile, test officials held a conference presumably to discuss the progress being made.

The next day, the Mercury returned and was washed for "contamination." Three days later it was washed again.

SOUNDPROOFED SUITCASES

The Big City team also bought various suitcases, batteries, small motors and sound proofing material to build "air samplers."

However, the battery-driven motors in the disguised suitcases apparently gave the CIA-Army team difficulty. An "acoustical blanket" was purchased to "diminish noise in special sampler." Fiberglass was tried as a "lining for suitcase" as well as acoustic tile and thick felt.

Suitcases were also used for "dissemination." the CIA-Army team bought a variety of "bug dusters" and "midget motors" that were small enough to easily fit into a suitcase.

Finding one "bug duster" bought for 24¢, ACHG researchers were able to design a somewhat crude but effective model to gain an idea of one type the team may have created.

For protection, the team relied on "nasal filter pads." The files do not show what other precautions were taken with the petty cash funds.

THE TOY DOG TEST

Apparently, other preparations for Operation Big City were made over a year in advance.

While earlier receipts have even less information than the New York test, another "air contamination test" can be found in October, 1955, three weeks before the work on the Mercury started.

After the purchase of suitcases, bug dusters, nasal filter pads and small six volt motors, a hotel room was taken in an unidentified location on October 7, 1955, to serve as a "Central Hdqtrs [sic - "Head-quarters"] during test." That same day, a "toy dog" was purchased for \$1.00. The receipt says the toy dog was bought because it was "exposed" during the "air contamination test" and was to be tested in a lab.

test," live animals begin to appear in the receipts as the New York test approaches.

While animal food and equipment were not supposed to be purchased with the petty cash funds, two "emergency" items were bought.

"Animal fresh food" (sic) was bought on October 11, 1955, for \$2.89. It does not say what was bought or what the animals were. Two weeks later, four quarts of "special milk to build up animals for tests" were purchased. The receipt says the animals were mice. No tests before Operation Big City are in the receipts.

Animal restraining devices were also bought. A "sash cord" and "leather straps" as well as a "linen sheet" were all bought on December 5, 1955. The receipt cryptically notes they all were to "tie animal."

FITTING THE PIECES

Even with fragmented, disjointed, incomplete and heavily censored receipts, the CIA-Army testing can be outlined:

The CIA-Army team experimented with a variety of devices capable of covertly disseminating a biological agent. Soundproofed suitcases that carried battery-driven bug dusters to disseminate an unknown agent were constructed. Air samplers to measure the distribution of the agent were also built and tested.

After a short "air contamination test" in an unidentified but public locale in October 1955, the team conducted another but larger test in the New York City area from February 11-15, 1956.

A specially equipped 1953 Mercury was used to disseminate an unknown agent through a unique exhaust system that required that it extend a foot and a half beyond its normal length. Very possibly, the agent was delivered by a battery powered motor through platinum tubing into the exhaust while the car was being driven. The car traveled four turnpikes and tunnels round trip in five days.

Evidence that the agent was biological can be found in the car being washed to handle the "contamination." Three days later, it was washed again.

HIDDEN DISEASES

It cannot easily be determined what effects the tests may have had on New York City area citizens because CIA deletions will not permit sufficient scrutiny of the records. Also, the records are not complete and do not contain any reports on the testing.

But, more difficult, the CIA was kept abreast which diseases "were common in what areas of the world so that

covert use of biological weapons containing these diseases could easily go undetected," a Senate report stated. The CIA was given the information by the SOD which also cooperated in MKNAOMI.

When told about the tests and asked to comment, an Army official told *FREEDOM*: "If it is a CIA file, you will have to ask them. We have nothing to say."

A CIA spokesman told *FREEDOM* that it was agency policy to not comment on any material released under the Freedom of Information Act.

"The material will just have to stand on its own," he said.

Brian Anderson, Washington Director of *American Citizens for Honesty in Government*, called for the files to be released with no deletions.

"The public has a right to know who has been the target of chemical or biological testing, and what substances were used," said Anderson.

Whether it be Russian, English, French, or American," Anderson continued, "these weapons are of such magnitude that they pose a threat as great as nuclear warfare. We can close the door to that threat only when people have all the facts." Δ

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